United Nations A/65/944

General Assembly

Distr.: General
12 September 2011

Original: English

Sixty-fifth session
Agenda item 22 (c)
Globalization and interdependence: international migration and development

Summary of the informal thematic debate on international migration and development

Note by the President of the General Assembly

I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 63/225, the President of the General Assembly convened an informal thematic debate on international migration and development in New York on 19 May 2011. The purpose of the debate was to take stock of and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on international migration and development, including the process leading to the General Assembly's second High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, in 2013.

II. Opening session

2. Since 2006, when the General Assembly held its first High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, the international community has made considerable progress in strengthening international cooperation to leverage the contributions of migrants and migration to individual and societal development and to address the negative consequences of migration, as noted by several speakers at the opening session. Many countries have developed innovative policies and programmes to engage their expatriate communities in the development process, to enhance regional collaboration and consultation and to reduce the transfer costs of remittances. In addition, the number of multilateral projects seeking to realize the benefits of international migration for development has increased markedly. Yet many challenges remain. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the positive contributions of migration to development, the economic and financial crises, coupled with rising levels of unemployment, have led to increasing anti-immigrant sentiments in many societies. Recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa have highlighted the vulnerability of international migrants and the need for greater cooperation and coordination at all levels.

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III. Panel 1: The contribution of migrants to development

3. The debate recognized that international migration has many positive consequences for migrants, their families and both countries of destination and countries of origin. Remittances improve the standard of living of families remaining in the country of origin, including by expanding their access to health and education services. While the developmental impact of remittances could be improved, it was acknowledged that remittances were private income and could not be a substitute for foreign direct investment or official development assistance. Several participants drew the Assembly's attention to the "five by five" initiative, endorsed by the Group of Eight in 2009, which sought to reduce average remittance transfer costs by five percentage points over five years and to make financial services more accessible to migrants and their families.

4. The debate highlighted a number of new policies directed at leveraging the contribution of migrant communities to the development of countries of origin. Expatriate communities are playing an increasingly active role in mobilizing human, social and financial resources to foster development in their home countries. Countries of origin have been strengthening ties with their nationals abroad, including by promoting their political participation, encouraging their involvement in trade and investment and providing legal assistance and training. Bilateral donors are providing funding and technical support for co-development projects involving migrant communities. Innovative strategies to harness migrant entrepreneurship are being initiated, while awareness about the obstacles that migrant entrepreneurs face upon return has been increasing. Such obstacles include the lack of access to affordable capital because of the non-portability of both pensions and credit histories, a poorly developed business environment and the lack of recognition of credentials.

5. Policies to promote circular migration and voluntary return were also showcased. Allowing migrants to maintain the right to residence at destination while they return temporarily to their countries of origin is considered critical for the success of circular migration programmes. Some countries of destination offer returning migrants access to special loans and tax breaks as part of programmes to support voluntary return, while some countries of origin have adjusted their tax laws to create a more favourable investment climate for their nationals abroad, which is often the first step towards successful return and productive employment, as well as job creation back home.

6. Participants expressed concern about the international recruitment of skilled professionals, such as doctors, nurses and teachers, from developing countries facing serious shortages of those skills. The adoption of the Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel, by the sixty-third World Health Assembly in 2010, was welcomed.

7. The debate underscored that the demand for skilled workers is likely to increase in the future owing to global market forces. To address the growing demand for skilled workers, countries of destination are encouraged to adopt ethical recruitment practices, while countries of origin, with the support of donor countries, are encouraged to improve their training standards and to enlarge the pool of those being trained. The policies of countries that have been attracting back skilled nationals were highlighted and the need to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of those policies was underscored.

8. Despite a widespread recognition of the positive contributions of international migration to development, several participants cautioned that international migration should not be considered an alternative to development. While migrants can be encouraged to contribute to development efforts, Governments remained responsible for achieving sustainable development and improving human well-being, including by reducing poverty.

9. Several participants called for redoubling efforts to ensure respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of international migrants. Racist and xenophobic undertones are increasingly taking hold of the political discourse in major receiving countries, underscoring the need to redouble efforts to protect the rights of all international migrants. Migrant workers are often subject to discrimination and even exploitation. Given their secluded working environment, domestic workers, most of whom are women, are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Participants stressed that migrants were first and foremost human beings with inalienable rights that transcend their immigration status. Member States were urged to ratify and implement all the international instruments relevant to international migration, including the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

10. Participants provided several examples of the adverse effects that international migration could have on families, especially on children who stayed behind in the countries of origin while one or both of their parents went abroad. Allowing family reunification is beneficial in reducing the negative social effect of international migration on families. When children remain behind, it is important to provide the services that can assist in addressing the psychological and social impacts of family separation.

IV. Panel 2: Improving international cooperation on international migration and development

11. Strengthening cooperation at the global, regional and bilateral levels is an essential component of any strategy seeking to enhance the contribution of international migration and migrants to development. With skill shortages affecting every region of the world, international labour mobility has become a standard feature of a globalized world. Participants recognized the important role of regional consultative processes on migration in promoting dialogue and cooperation among countries. They also acknowledged the importance of international cooperation in facilitating a more effective management of the recruitment and admission of migrant workers, fostering improvements in their working conditions and ensuring that the recruitment industry followed existing regulations. Bilateral initiatives to recognize qualifications, facilitate the mobility of different categories of skilled migrants, support the voluntary return of migrants and ensure the portability of pensions and other social benefits have borne fruit. Nevertheless, some bilateral agreements do not take full account of the interests of countries of origin and the mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of such agreements were sometimes deficient.

12. Development cooperation was a central focus of the debate. Since 2006, donor countries have allocated nearly a quarter of a billion dollars to multilateral activities on international migration and development. Furthermore, with the support of the

international community, an increasing number of countries have incorporated international migration into their national development plans. Greater international cooperation is required to address the root causes of international migration, including poverty, the lack of employment opportunities, conflict, poor governance and environmental degradation. Still too often, people migrate out of necessity rather than choice.

13. Several participants underscored the limitations of a unilateral approach to managing international migration, noting that migrants often pay the ultimate price for the lack of collaboration between countries. Transnational organized crime, including human trafficking and migrant smuggling, offered striking examples of policy concerns that could be addressed effectively only through collaboration at the bilateral or multilateral levels. States have a shared responsibility in promoting safe and legal international migration, combating irregular migration and human trafficking, enhancing migrant integration, safeguarding the rights of migrants and protecting the most vulnerable, including certain migrant women and children.

14. The debate acknowledged the success of the Global Forum on Migration and Development in fostering cooperation, sharing good practices and promoting a constructive dialogue among Member States and relevant international agencies, as well as with civil society. Noting that informal processes have their limitations, some Member States called for the establishment of more formal mechanisms to advance the debate on international migration and development. They identified the United Nations — and in particular the General Assembly — as the most suitable venue for the development of such mechanisms. Other Member States viewed the Global Forum and the debate in the General Assembly as complementary and mutually reinforcing processes. The assessment of the Global Forum, being undertaken under the auspices of the Forum's Chair-in-Office (Ambassador Eduard Gnesa of Switzerland), is expected to serve as an important input for the High-level Dialogue in 2013. However, particularly in the light of the financial crisis, the lack of stable funding and difficulties in identifying countries willing to host future meetings of the Global Forum were obstacles to the continuation of this process.

15. Participants expressed appreciation for the increased collaboration among international organizations in addressing international migration issues. Since its establishment in 2006, the Global Migration Group — an inter-agency group that includes 15 organizations of the United Nations system plus the International Organization for Migration — has made major strides in supporting Member States in a collaborative and coordinated manner, especially by assisting in the implementation of the suggestions emanating from the Global Forum. The recent crisis in northern Africa has highlighted the importance of collaboration and coordination among relevant members of the Global Migration Group.

16. Participants recognized the contributions made by the Global Migration Group to the improvement of the evidence on the nexus between international migration and development. Informing the public about the contributions of international migrants was considered essential to counter discrimination, racism and the social exclusion of migrants.

V. Closing session and conclusions

17. As the debate's rich discussion indicated, international migration deserves continued attention from the international community, both because international cooperation is necessary to take advantage of the opportunities that international migration generates and because its impact is likely to increase in the future. As a global phenomenon, international migration requires a global approach. Partnerships at all levels are necessary to address effectively the complex relationship between international migration and development.

18. By showcasing good practices and sharing innovative policies, programmes and projects, the debate set a useful basis for the in-depth consideration of those issues in 2013. In the meantime, every effort should be made to continue the dialogue, strengthen partnerships, support capacity-development and safeguard the rights of migrants. No opportunity should be missed to facilitate the contribution of international migration to improve human well-being and, in particular, to reduce poverty and contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.